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Word Play in Tabloid Headlines: A Pragmatic Approach to Media Texts

Yulia V. Yuzhakova

Nosov Magnitogorsk State Technical University, Magnitogorsk, Russia, julia_south@mail.ru, <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6790-044X>

Abstract. The study examines the role of wordplay in tabloid headlines from a pragmatic point of view. So, the principal analytical tool is pragmatic analysis supported by contextual analysis, cultural interpretation, component semantic analysis, and stylistic analysis. The scientific novelty of the article lies in the application of the traditional pragmatic approach to modern material. The article expands the discourse on the functioning of tabloid headlines and demonstrates the possibilities of analyzing and interpreting wordplay in tabloid headlines. The main objective of the article is to analyze how this linguostylistic (rhetorical) device contributes to the implementation of the pragmatic function of headlines, which implies identifying common types of wordplay in tabloid headlines and determining their pragmatic functions. The article analyzes linguostylistic (rhetorical) devices used to create witty and provocative headlines (puns, language contaminations, metaphors). Particular attention is paid to the functions that wordplay performs in tabloid headlines: attracting readers; conveying several meanings simultaneously; emotional impact on readers; softening the potential bluntness or aggressiveness of the headline (manipulative impact). The influence of wordplay in tabloids headlines on the increasing the memorability of the text is considered. The importance of lexical creativity in the process of interaction with the audience for implementation of the influence function and formation of a certain perception and interpretation of information through the headlines of media texts (in particular, tabloid headlines) is noted. The results of the study emphasize that wordplay is one of the linguostylistic (rhetorical) devices that contribute to the implementation of the pragmatic function of tabloid headlines, designed to evoke emotional reactions, arouse curiosity and form certain interpretations.

Keywords: pragmatics, pragemme, informeme, English media texts, media linguistics, a media headline, tabloid

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ЯЗЫКОЗНАНИЕ

Научная статья

Игра слов в заголовках таблоидов: прагматический подход к медиатекстам

Юлия Владимировна Южакова

Магнитогорский государственный технический университет им. Г. И. Носова, Магнитогорск, Россия, julia_south@mail.ru, <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6790-044X>

Аннотация. В исследовании рассматривается роль игры слов в заголовках таблоидов с прагматической точки зрения. Соответственно, основным инструментом исследования является прагматический анализ, вспомогательными методами служат контекстный анализ, метод культурологической интерпретации, компонентный семантический и стилистический анализ. Научная новизна статьи заключается в применении традиционно-прагматического подхода к изучению материала современных англоязычных медиатекстов. Статья расширяет дискурс функционирования заголовков СМИ и демонстрирует возможности анализа и интерпретации игры слов в заголовках таблоидов. Основная цель исследования – проанализировать, как данный лингвостилистический (риторический) прием способствует реализации прагматической функции заголовков, что подразумевает выявление распространенных типов игры слов в заголовках таблоидов и определение их прагматических функций. Анализируются лингвостилистические (риторические) приемы, используемые для создания остроумных

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и провокационных заголовков (каламбур, языковые контаминации, метафоры). Особое внимание уделяется функциям, которые игра слов выполняет в заголовках таблоидов: привлечение читателей; передача нескольких смыслов одновременно; эмоциональное воздействие на читателей; смягчение излишней прямоты или агрессивности заголовка (манипулятивное воздействие). Рассматривается влияние игры слов на повышение запоминаемости текста. Отмечается значимость лексического творчества в процессе взаимодействия с аудиторией для реализации функции воздействия и формирования определенного восприятия информации через заголовки медиатекстов (в частности, заголовки таблоидов). Результаты исследования подчеркивают, что игра слов – это один из лингвостилистических (риторических) приемов, способствующих реализации прагматической функции заголовков таблоидов, призванной вызывать эмоциональные реакции, возбуждать любопытство и формировать определенные интерпретации.

Ключевые слова: прагматика, прагмема, информема, англоязычные медиатексты, медиалингвистика, заголовки СМИ

Introduction

Modern world is characterized by rapid information dissemination and the proliferation of digital media. In the contemporary media landscape, headlines serve as the critical gateway to news articles, social media posts, and other forms of communication. Their significance extends beyond mere summarizing the media text content, since headlines are a fundamental component of media language operating within a pragmatic framework.

Our study is focused on the language of tabloid headlines (particularly word play functioning) since this issue remains highly relevant for academic and social reasons.

Examining the use of word play and other linguistic devices in tabloid headlines identifies cultural values and societal anxieties of the time. The research contributes to understanding the dynamics of modern storytelling and the interplay between linguistic creativity and media communication strategies.

The work is aimed at a linguistic and functional analysis of how wordplay operates within the current tabloid headlines. It is done through identifying and categorizing types of wordplay (e. g. puns, contaminations, metaphors etc.); examining phonetic, semantic, and morphological aspects of wordplay in headlines; investigating the functional roles of wordplay in enhancing the communicative effectiveness of tabloid headlines (including attracting attention, evoking humor, or conveying multiple layers of meaning).

The article offers theoretical and practical contributions by integrating pragmatics (a branch of linguistics concerned with language use in context) into the analysis of tabloid headlines. Its significance lies in expanding the understanding of how language functions within media texts, particularly in the high-impact, attention-grabbing genre of tabloids.

Materials and Methods

Currently, media texts represent the most widespread form of the text prevailing the world text scope and information landscape. The majority of media texts are distributed through the Internet since most readers find it more convenient to obtain latest news and its interpretation in the electronic form rather than in an ordinary paper one. The latter lacks not only physical accessibility (one has to visit newsstand to buy a newspaper or a magazine) but also currency of information (it takes time to publish the news in the conventional media, as a result the news becomes outdated before it is printed, especially considering realia of the modern digitalized world in which information spreads immediately).

Before going deeper into the research let us remind you how the term “media text” emerged. The evolution of mass media brought about the “text” concept broadening. It merged the verbal (speech) component of a “text” with its “media” component denoting the mechanisms of the text “delivery” to the audience. So, the term “media text” combines both verbal and media facets. This terminology appeared at the end of the 20th century in English-language scholarly publications, notably in works by A. Bell [1; 2; 3], M. Montgomery [4; 5], N. Fairclough [6; 7], and R. Fowler [8]. In Russia, mediallynguistics is researched by T. G. Dobrosklonskaya [9; 10] and many other linguists. The above authors have proved that mass media texts do not only inform the mass reader but also possess the ability to affect public opinion, transform the reader’s value system, and build the reader’s viewpoint and worldview.

Tabloids represent a particular type of mass media having its own peculiarities that set them apart from traditional newspapers. Let us recollect some key features: tabloids are usually aimed at a mass audience seeking entertainment, sensational stories, or quick reading; they focus on dramatic, shocking, or emotionally charged stories to attract the reader’s attention; they often prioritize gossip, rumors, and personal lives as well as quick, eye-catching stories over in-depth serious investigative journalism; they use straight-

forward, colloquial language designed to appeal to a broad audience; tabloids headlines are often sensational and provocative since they are supposed to grab the audience's attention immediately. Wordplay as a specific linguistic and stylistic device can facilitate greatly the above-mentioned peculiarities of tabloids. For this reason, it is widely used in the media of the given type and can be considered another feature of tabloids.

In the contemporary media landscape headlines are a vital component of media text structure that not only convey the media text content but also affects the reader's attention and his or her interpretation of the text. In other words, analysis of media text headlines functioning can be done within a pragmatic framework.

While examining headlines of English-language tabloids, our principal analytical tool was pragmatic analysis. It involves scrutinizing communication objectives, intentions, and actions. Additionally, we use the contextual analysis, cultural interpretation, component semantic analysis, and stylistic analysis. We examined about 80 headlines from electronic versions of *The Sun* (www.thesun.co.uk) and *the Mirror* (<https://www.mirror.co.uk>), world famous British tabloids.

Results

Today's information overload compels the average reader to skim headlines, swiftly perusing to identify and select articles of interest. Thus, author-reader interaction transcends mere content dissemination. It aims to captivate the potential reader's attention, engage him or her with the material and consequently convey the essence of the text. Thus, a media text title works as a specialized linguo-pragmatic unit.

Pragmatics is the study of how context influences the interpretation of any text (in the broad meaning of the word). Speaking about media, pragmatics can explain how media text headlines significantly influence the audience's engagement and interpretation of the text. According to the above-mentioned approach the title is not merely a text label it is also a strategic tool that encapsulates the essence of the media text content and performs several pragmatic functions.

A primary function of any headlines is to seize the audience's attention. A captivating headline can determine whether the text is read or overlooked. Therefore intriguing, thought-provoking, or emotionally charged headlines are more likely to attract readers and encourage them to delve into the content [11].

Headlines also play a significant role in setting the audience's expectations regarding the content and tone of the media text. A straightforward and descriptive headline may imply a more factual piece, while a sensational or vague title might suggest a more subjective or entertaining narrative. These expectations can greatly influence how the audience perceives the subsequent content.

Headlines can produce the, so called, "anchoring effect". That is, the first piece of information (in our case, the headline) significantly shapes the audience's subsequent judgments. In other words, a skillfully created headline can help readers to develop specific expectations about the content, which can later affect their comprehension and interpretation.

The emotional impact of a headline can also enhance its influence. Headlines provoking strong feelings (such as anger, or curiosity) can build stronger ties with the readers and increase media text significance for the audience. To sum the above-mentioned facts up, we may say that media text headlines as well as tabloid headlines (representing a subtype of media text headlines) are created to get specific responses from the audience. A headline not only encapsulates the essence of an article but also frames it within a particular context, attracting readers' attention and shaping the way readers interpret the news [12].

Headlines combine informational and pragmatic elements. When the aim of the headline is to convey factual content (such as news, facts or data) it functions as an "informeme", emphasizing the logical and objective transmission of information. In contrast, when a headline seeks to affect the reader's emotions, interpretations, or worldview (by evoking emotions or shaping attitudes) it acts as a "pragmeme", which is focused on subjective and emotional impact. A single headline can perform both roles simultaneously, that is to deliver information and affect the reader's psychological state. However, these two functions differ in their primary focus: informemes prioritize clear, logical, and factual content; pragmemes emphasize subjective, emotional, or attitudinal influence [13].

Headlines that allow varied interpretations or utterly confuse the reader capture their attention and have significant pragmatic potential. Such misleading headings are typical for tabloids, trying to intrigue the potential readers. They can obscure the essence of the article to such an extent that introductory phrases or sentences become necessary to decipher them [14]. As a result, a specific headline-introductory sentence complexes are used (often highlighted in bold, italics, or colors, etc.) in order to explain the headline.

For example, the headline "HOLY PAD: *Secret ancient papal palace where Popes lived before the*

Vatican is unearthed in Rome” [15]. The information in the headline “HOLY PAD” is insufficient; it is unclear what the article is about; the reader is confused and intrigued. The opening sentence “*Secret ancient papal palace where Popes lived before the Vatican is unearthed in Rome*” reveals and explains the content of the text. The title itself “HOLY PAD” represents intriguing play on words that combines religious and residential themes. The word “*holy*” refers to something sacred or associated with religious authority, which aligns with the context proposed in the introductory sentence. The word “*pad*” is a colloquial term for a residence or dwelling place. So, the combination “*holy pad*” can be interpreted as a sacred or revered residence, which fits the description given in the introductory sentence as a secret ancient papal palace where Popes lived prior to the construction or use of the Vatican. The word combination “*holy pad*” functions as an oxymoron and represents the word play on the lexical-semantic level. It combines the religious significance (“*holy*”) with an informal term for residence (“*pad*”) to create a humorous or memorable headline, emphasizing the idea of a hidden or lesser-known residence steeped in religious history.

The headline “OAR-SOME: *I’m braving shipwreck graveyard & Europe’s largest WHIRLPOOL in bid to be 1st person to row solo around Britain*” [16] contains the word “*oar-some*” which is simultaneously a phonetic pun (working on the phonetic and the lexical-semantic levels) and contamination (functioning on the morphological level). It combines elements related to rowing and adventure: “*oar*” means directly the rowing oar used to propel a boat, “*some*” is a common suffix meaning “having a particular quality”. Together, “*oar-some*” sounds like “*awesome*”, a word used to describe something impressive, exciting, or daring. In such a way the pun ties the act of rowing (using oars) to the idea of being impressive or admirable. So, the headline highlights the daring nature of the challenge and frames the rower’s attempt as something remarkable and “*awesome*”.

The headline “MAKES NO CENTS: *50 Cent’s rapper pal Bang Em Smurf staying in UK asylum hotel paid for by YOU after fleeing gangs in his native Trinidad*” [17] also represents a phonetic pun “*makes no cents*” that plays on the phrase “*makes no sense*” and the word “*cents*” on. The headline also contains an allusion (the lexical-semantic level) to a rapper known as 50 Cent mentioned in the introductory sentence. The word combination “*makes no cents*” sounds like “*makes no sense*” and implies something illogical or absurd. The word “*cents*” implies a financial aspect of the described situation. The introductory sentence reveals the context of the story: “*Bang Em Smurf, a rapper friend of 50 Cent, is staying in a UK asylum hotel paid for by taxpayers after fleeing gangs in Trinidad*”. Having considered all the above-mentioned information we may say that the headline combines humor and critique. According to the headline the situation is illogical (“*makes no sense*”), it is a waste of money (“*makes no cents*”), especially considering the refugee’s circumstances and the public funds used to support him.

The headline “LOO-NACY: *Fury as trains ‘upgraded’ at cost of £1billion have NO toilets on board in move slammed as ‘absolute madness’*” [18] contains contamination working on the morphological level “*loo-nacy*” consisting of “*loo*” (a colloquial term for toilet) with “*lunacy*” (the word meaning madness or insanity). The introductory sentence explains the context: *fury over train upgrades costing £1 billion that lack toilets on board*. This wordplay serves to draw attention, evoke humor, and emphasize the perceived madness of the decision. The headline satirizes upgrading trains at vast expense while ignoring essential features like toilets. In such a way the absurdity of the situation is emphasized.

The headline “HASTA LA VISA: *Foreign care workers face visa ban in sweeping crackdown as Starmer set to unveil long-awaited immigration blueprint*” [19] includes a word play “*Hasta la VISA*” on the Spanish phrase “*Hasta la vista*,” meaning “*See you later*”. “*Hasta la vista*” is a well-known farewell phrase, often used in popular culture (e. g. film “*Terminator*”). Replacing “*vista*” with “*VISA*” creates a phonetic pun (functioning on the phonetic and the lexical-semantic levels), which relies on the similarity in sound between “*vista*” in “*Hasta la vista*” and “*visa*”. It plays on the similarity of words to create humorous effect and emphasize the visa-related theme of the headline, it implies the farewell to visas or immigration status. The headline highlights the potential exclusion or restriction of foreign care workers through visa bans, metaphorically bidding farewell to their presence in the UK amidst new immigration policies.

The headline “*Major ‘vapocalypse’ warning as new products threaten disposable vape ban*” [20] contains contamination (representing the morphological level) “*vapocalypse*” combining “*vape*” and “*apocalypse*”. It plays on the word “*apocalypse*” to suggest a disastrous or catastrophic event related to vaping. The term implies that the situation surrounding vaping is nearing a collapse due to new regulations.

The headline “*Angela Rayner promises to cut red-tape to get spades in ground for new homes*” [21] highlights a promise to reduce bureaucratic obstacles (“*red-tape*”) in order to accelerate the construction of new homes, symbolized by the phrase “*get spades in ground*”. “*Red-tape*” is a metaphor symbolizing bureaucratic barriers, regulations, or administrative hurdles. “*Spades in ground*” is another metaphor for start-

ing construction or development. It symbolizes action and tangible progress. The headline employs metaphors “*red-tape*”, “*spades in ground*” (functioning on the lexical-semantic level) to vividly convey the promise of reducing bureaucratic delays and initiating tangible progress in housing development. The tone is assertive, emphasizing action and commitment.

The headline “*Reform's gang of snake-oil salesmen are not on the side of the people of Britain*” [22] employs a strong negative metaphor “*snake-oil salesman*” (working the lexical-semantic level). The phrase historically refers to charlatans selling fake remedies, emphasizing dishonesty and trickery. Thus, the metaphor portrays reform supporters as deceitful and untrustworthy, implying they peddle false promises. The collective noun “*gang*” adds a negative, almost criminal image, portraying the group working together dishonestly. Negation “*are not on the side of the people*” clearly positions the group as opposed to the interests of ordinary citizens, evoking a sense of betrayal or opposition. The tone of the headline is accusatory and condemnatory, aiming to cast the headline subject as untrustworthy and divisive.

Discussion

The analyzed headlines exemplify the concept of pragmemes – linguistic units that serve pragmatic functions within communication. Their pragmatic efficacy is achieved through linguistic devices that induce dual interpretations or confusion in the reader, thereby amplifying engagement. In the context of information-dense environments, effective headlines are crafted to rapidly attract attention by employing various pragmatic strategies, linguistic and stylistic (rhetorical) devices aimed at capturing and keeping the reader’s interest. Wordplay represents one of such devices.

All the headlines containing wordplay within the examined corpus were exclusively from the news and politics sections. These sections often feature articles that may present negative or conflicting evaluations of the events described. The ambiguity created by wordplay serves to mitigate the potential bluntness or aggressiveness of the language, preventing the reader from feeling alienated or offended. Additionally, the humorous effect generated by such wordplay tends to lead readers to accept the author's opinion more readily, thereby subtly shaping their perception of the news.

Wordplay within tabloid headlines functions as a stylistic (rhetorical) device designed to attract readership, convey multiple layers of meaning, evoke the reader’s emotional or cognitive responses, and mitigate the potential bluntness or aggressiveness of the headline. This technique enhances communicative impact by engaging the audience through inventive and playful language use. The primary pragmatic functions of wordplay in tabloid headlines include: capturing reader’s attention (via puns, contaminations, or playful phrasing that distinguish the headline amid competing content); conveying polysemy (allowing a single phrase to suggest multiple interpretations, thereby adding depth, humor, or intrigue that encourages further exploration); fostering memorability (clever wordplay results in more salient and easily recalled headlines which makes it easier to remember the message of the text and contributes to its viral sharing); establishing tone (selecting playful or witty language sets an emotional or stylistic tone (humorous, ironic, provocative) consistent with the article content); stimulating engagement (wordplay can provoke curiosity or amusement, motivating the readers to click, read, or participate in discussions); mitigating the potential bluntness or aggressiveness of the headline language (obscuring the message, the wordplay can prevent the reader from feeling alienated or offended). Thus, wordplay in tabloid headlines functions as a multifaceted tool (persuasive, aesthetic, and communicative) that enhances reader engagement and effectively conveys the intended message.

Phonetic puns, contaminations and their combinations are prevalent forms of wordplay within the studied tabloids. They function on the phonetic, morphological and the lexical-semantic levels. The lexical-semantic level has also been represented by an oxymoron, an allusion and a metaphor (as solitary instances). So, we may say that phonetic puns and contaminations considerably outnumber the play on words of other types in tabloid headlines. Therefore, we may suggest that phonetic puns and contaminations can be considered the most efficient types of wordplay in tabloid headlines.

Conclusion

The study highlights the role of wordplay in the effectiveness of tabloid headlines, illustrating how linguistic creativity enhances persuasive and attention-grabbing functions of tabloids. Through a pragmatic lens, it becomes evident that word play not only serves aesthetic purposes but also strategically influences readers’ interpretation through using implicature, context, and shared cultural knowledge. The findings un-

derscore that the playful manipulation of language in tabloid headlines is a pragmatic device designed to evoke emotional responses, provoke curiosity, and form interpretations. Recognizing these pragmatic mechanisms contributes to deeper understanding of how media texts work within the realm of popular journalism, emphasizing the importance of critical engagement with media language in contemporary society.

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Информация об авторах

Южакова Ю. В. – кандидат филологических наук, доцент кафедры иностранных языков по техническим направлениям Института гуманитарного образования ФГБОУ ВО «Магнитогорский государственный технический университет им. Г.И. Носова».

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Information about the authors

Yuzhakova Yu. V., Candidate of Philology, Associate Professor at the Department of Foreign Languages in Engineering, Institute of Humanitarian Education, Nosov Magnitogorsk State Technical University.

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